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ABSTRACT

In a country beset with confrontation and division--some of it over the quality of education--educators should consider as a basic need, the right of every student to read. With taxpapers concerned about the cost of education, educators need to make certain that present allotments go to priority needs, which surely include alleviating the tragic but challenging degree of reading difficulty manifest by an estimated 10 million American children. While aiming at the life style of the student--particularly the student in the ghetto--in terms of reading interests, educators should be less defensive, vague, and secretive about their program results. While applying the eclectically balanced approach required in each teaching situation, they should strive for more results; they should be goal conscious. To succeed, the Right to Read impetus must become a grass-roots effort. The U.S. Office of Education in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare and also state education departments are preparing steps that will support such a movement. Steps for local citizens to take in improving reading in the schools and in developing a grass-roots concern for the Right to Read are detailed. (BT)

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THE RIGHT TO READ -- CHALLENGE FOR LOCAL LEADERSHIP*

Address by James E. Allen, Jr.
Assistant Secretary for Education
and
U.S. Commissioner of Education

All of you gathered here this evening are well aware that public education in the United States is experiencing trying times. Within a society too often marked by division and confrontation, schools across the country are facing increasing loss in public confidence. Budgets and bond issues are defeated with disturbing regularity. Taxpayer revolts rumble across the land. Parents demonstrate and students erupt in communities of all sizes and makeup. Indeed there are many difficulties before us.

Any listing of problems facing public education must surely include such issues as

- learning how to educate deeply deprived children
- eliminating deficiencies in reading and in other basic skills
- bringing about drastic improvement in the structure, administration and management of our educational system
- improving vocational education -- in quality and status
- extending opportunities for post-secondary education
- improving the quality of teachers and teaching
- eliminating inequities in educational finance and assuring greater stability and adequacy of fiscal support systems

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- doing justice to the children of Black, Brown and other minority groups
- eliminating the causes of student unrest
- maintaining the freedom and diversity of our educational enterprise, and
- raising generally the quality of our educational programs and institutions.

Finding solutions to such problems is an enormously complex and difficult matter. Time and your patience do not permit me to discuss such a listing with you on this occasion. Both you and I would be overwhelmed by that task.

But let me attempt this evening to do what I am so frequently forced to do in Washington -- look at all the problems and select one on which to move first. We need at this time a target which unites rather than divides, which can be achieved in a period of severe restraints, which brings together the private and public interests of our society and which addresses itself to one of the most relevant needs of youth in this day.

Last week I addressed the National Association of State Boards of Education and chose such a target. At that time I stated that as U.S. Commissioner of Education, I am herewith proclaiming my belief that <u>we should immediately set for ourselves the goal of assuring that by the end of the 1970's the right to read shall be a reality</u>

for all -- that no one shall be leaving our schools without the skill and the desire necessary to read to the full limits of his capability.

I repeat that call tonight before this audience of local community leaders and professional educators for I am convinced that achieving this goal is a much needed priority and will require the efforts of people of good will at all levels of government and from all sectors of our economy. This task is your task as well as mine; it must be a national effort as well as a Federal one.

Although I would like to, I cannot promise you any massive new infusion of Federal funds. Indeed, I must be frank in saying that the battle against inflation and our continued involvement in Vietnam make it unlikely that there will be any large increases in Federal education funds in the near future.

This is a reality we must face just as we must recognize that local property taxes are increasingly inadequate to meet all the challenges facing education. But we already have fifty billion dollars which will be spent on education in the United States this year. If we cannot hope for significant new funds, we had better take a hard look at how we are using the funds we already have and do some serious re-ordering of priorities. If there are not to be enough dollars to go around, we must be certain that the dollars we have go first to those needs which are foremost in the education of our children.

Place yourself, if you would, in the position of our youths today and ask yourself what are the basic skills which you must have before leaving school in order to participate fully in our economy. I believe almost all of us would agree that the ability to read is a "must"; I also believe that it would head our list of "musts".

But we tend to assume that our schools <u>are</u> teaching young people to read. Let me point out some facts to challenge that assumption:

- One out of every four students nationwide has significant reading deficiencies.
- In large city school systems up to half of the students read below expectations.
- There are more than three million illiterates in our adult population.
- About half of the unemployed youth, ages 16-21, are functionally illiterate.
- Three-quarters of the juvenile offenders in one major city are two or more years retarded in reading.
- In a recent U.S. Armed Forces program called Project 100,000, 60.2 percent of the young men fell below grade seven in reading and academic ability.

The tragedy of these statistics is that they represent a barrier to success that for too many young adults produces the misery of a life marked by poverty, unemployment, alienation and, in many cases, crime.

It is inexcusable that in this day when man has achieved such giant steps in the development of his potential, when many of his accomplishments approach the miraculous, there still should be those who cannot read. It is equally inexcusable that there still should be those who perhaps can read but have never gained the desire to read.

I was struck by a recent advertisement in the New York Times book review section depicting a young black boy reading a book on Dick and Jane at the Farm. The caption, in large bold print, was:

*See the nice book.

*See the big boy read the nice book.

*See the big boy drop out of school.

Reading must be relevant to the life style of the individual -- it must be real to be grasped -- it must be experienced to be understood or it becomes a detrimental force in a child's development.

It doesn't take long for a fourteen-year-old boy who lives in a large city ghetto to become bored with the rural adventures of Dick and Jane.

Not that the ghettos of our cities have any monopoly on young people whose reading abilities don't match their age levels. We estimate over 10,000,000 American children and teenagers have some significant reading difficulty.

These individuals have been denied a right -- a right as fundamental as the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness -- the right to read.

Assuring this right for all youth is a goal which people can understand. It is a goal which people can support. I believe much of the tendency towards skepticism about schools today is our own fault. We have dealt with the public in terms which, while reflecting worthy programs, too often have little meaning to the average citizen -- compensatory education, team teaching, individualized instruction, and on and on. We have been, in some instances, defensive, vague and even secretive about the results of our programs. We have pleaded and cajoled for maximum support for everything in our schools from marching bands to advanced placement mathematics with too little acknowledgement sometimes of what is essential versus what is desirable.

I believe we have been expecting too much of our publics and proving too little. I hear a message from across the country which impresses me with one fact. Our communities are becoming more concerned with results than they are with offerings and good intent.

We must produce more results and we can find no better place to start than in assuring every student the right to read. This is something a taxicab driver understands and an engineer and a baker and a physician. It is something State legislators and city councilmen

understand and I am confident it is something that appropriations committees understand.

Let me be very clear that I am not asking that we find one way to teach reading more effectively. We know many ways to teach reading and some children require different methods than others. Very good techniques, equipment and materials for the teaching of reading already exist; new ones should be added. But the goal is what we are concerned about, not any single approach.

This is a job for all of us. No one level of government or the economy can do it alone, and certainly this is truest of the Federal level. I have heard education in the United States described as a matter of Federal concern, State responsibility and local control. I fully subscribe to this concept. That is why I chose last week's meeting of State Boards of Education and this evening's meeting of local community and educational leaders to sound the call for this new national goal. It is the reason why a nationwide citizen's committee is being formed with Mrs. Richard M. Nixon as its Honorary Chairman. The Right to Read must be a grass-roots effort if it is to succeed.

I will be announcing in coming months what steps are being taken by the U.S. Office of Education in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare and State education departments to support this goal.

Indeed, much has been done already by the Office of Education to support reading. Over ten million dollars in research funds have been spent on reading projects over the last four years. Sixty percent of the $1.1 billion Title I funds for the disadvantaged go into reading and related skills programs. This is good, but it must get better and it will. But its successful achievement will rest primarily upon local support and local effort by educators and by citizens representative of the entire community.

Let me suggest some first steps for you to consider in the Chicago area. American Education Week is scheduled for the week of November 9-15 and this year has as its theme "Better Education -- Your Job". What better occasion to kick off a community-wide effort to begin our battle against reading deficiencies. Some specific acts might include:

- Appointing local right to read committees bringing together representatives of neighborhoods, the professions, industry, business, the arts, labor and civic groups to examine where your community stands in reading and where such a coalition of support can best focus its efforts.
- Writing to local philanthropists and businesses to seek financial support for publicizing needs to taxpayers and setting up special grants for neighborhood reading projects.
- Bringing to public attention what already is being done to

help children in need of special assistance and how many more go unserved.

- Urging your local radio, television and press to run series on reading and what more needs to be done.
- Inviting reading experts in your local colleges and universities to assist with the needs of your community.
- Exchanging ideas on what is being done to upgrade reading skills of employees in local businesses and industries.
- Encouraging active and concerned youth to participate in student-to-student tutoring programs.
- Volunteering your services to schools, neighborhood centers, YMCA's and similar agencies to help with the fostering of reading skills.
- Seeing that relevant books and other materials are readily available to children.
- Building upon existing programs in your public libraries and developing means to make their resources more accessible to children.
- Encouraging workshops and counseling services for mothers of young children to foster greater exposure of preschool children to reading experiences.
- Providing a clearinghouse of local projects so that good ideas are spread across your city.
- And, above all, speaking out collectively and individually

on behalf of the right of every child to the skills of reading.

For those of you who are educators, I urge that you review your dedication to seeing that this very basic skill is taught each day to the best of your ability. Examine the time devoted to reading in your classes, the available dollars which might be redirected towards reading services and the priority being given in local in-service training programs to reading. Publicize your best reading teachers and let them help teach their colleagues. Seek out reading materials made available in the community and by local businesses which may be more relevant and exciting than any successor to the McGuffey Reader.

These are but some ideas and I am sure each of you here tonight can think of others.

I urge you this evening to begin studying and planning -- educators and citizens together -- during 1969-70 so that this year can be recorded as the year when together we set in motion the Nation-wide effort that will erase this intolerable deficit in American education.

The decade of the 70's will see the 200th anniversary of our Nation. A most appropriate celebration of that event -- a celebration that would honor the true spirit of the democratic concept, and recognize the fundamental importance ascribed to education from the beginning of our Nation, would be to secure for all of our citizens that right to read which so long ago made possible the feasibility of a democratic society and continues to undergird its strength.

We can count our problems and look to the future with dismay. Or we can seize our opportunities and win back for education the full, enthusiastic public confidence which is so essential to its success. The Right to Read gives us such an opportunity. Together, let us strive to make it a reality for all our children.

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